

## Understanding What Students Say: Interpreting My Voice Survey Results

**We do a good job of asking students what they know in school;  
we need to do much better asking students what  
they *think* and *feel* about their school.**

**– Dr. Russell J. Quaglia**

The My Voice survey report categorizes respondents’ answers to the survey in tables organized by the 8 Conditions that Make a Difference®—Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment, Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, Spirit of Adventure, Leadership & Responsibility, and Confidence to Take Action. For each indicator, the tables display the “total in agreement” (the sum of responses marked “strongly agree” and “agree” divided by all those who responded to that question), as well as the total in agreement broken down by gender and grade level. For example, a high school’s results for Heroes would include:

Heroes	Total in Agreement	Gender		Grade			
		Male	Female	9	10	11	12
Students respect teachers.	41%	38%	43%	40%	34%	45%	25%
I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.	68%	62%	77%	62%	75%	74%	67%

Reporting “total in agreement” provides schools with the most reliable information available from the survey and helps those reading the results stay action oriented. QISA cautions schools not to get bogged down in a discussion about students who marked “undecided.” They cannot be counted among those who agree, and agreement is ultimately the goal for each indicator.

Each school is asked to survey every student; as a result, there is no “sampling error” in the report. This provides schools with a solid foundation for interpretation and closes the door on wondering whether those who responded happened to be “axe-grinders” or, conversely, were those who “see the world through rose colored glasses.” Your school can be confident that the results reflect the general sentiments of the entire student body.

There are three important concepts to keep in mind when analyzing your survey results:

1. The results reflect respondents' perceptions of reality.
2. The data are merely numbers.
3. The most helpful comparisons are internal.

## Perception is Different Than Reality

The My Voice Survey is an opinion survey. As such, the results reflect your students' perceptions of reality, not necessarily reality. That is not to dismiss the results (as some are inclined to do) as students' perceptions or opinions: "That's just what the students *think*, we *know* what the truth is." On the contrary, your students' perceptions shape what they think and how they act in your school and so provide an accurate picture of your school's climate and culture. The fact of the matter is that reality is complex; to truly understand it, we need to hear various points of view on the same realities. When students' perceptions are put in dialogue with the staff's perceptions, insights emerge and can form a basis for sound decision making and action.

## Data are Merely Numbers

Numbers contain no insights, judgments of fact or value, decisions, or action plans. Mistakes some make are:

- ✓ To move too quickly from data to judgment of fact: "We correctly understand what students are saying."
- ✓ To jump from data to judgment of value: "This is *bad*."
- ✓ To leap from data to action planning: "We have to *do* something."

Rather, interpreting results is a process of moving from data to insights (what do these numbers mean?) to judgments of fact (have we understood the data correctly?) then value (is this important to us?) and from there to action (what should we do?).

This process *begins* with inquiry and dialogue among colleagues. In these conversations, your staff can question the data and form hypotheses that might explain the results. For example, if only 35% of your students report feeling proud of their school, what might be the source of that diminished pride? A lack of success in sports? An aging physical plant? Failing to meet AYP?

While the process begins with collegial conversation, it must not end there. "Analysis paralysis" is also a danger. QISA recommends focus groups with students to learn whether adults have correctly understood what students are saying. Only when you verify that you have understood correctly can you decide what actions to take to improve the Conditions that affect students' aspirations.

## Compare Yourself to Yourself

Many schools want to interpret their results in comparison to a national or state aggregate. While this can be interesting, it is not always helpful. The 8 Conditions are not norms, they are ideals. We want every student to feel like they belong. Every student should feel a sense of accomplishment. We should not be satisfied that a few percent less of our students are bored in school than the national average. As ideals, the “normative” level for each Condition is 100%.

The most illuminating and helpful comparisons are internal. What do boys in your school say as compared to girls? If there is a discrepancy, what accounts for it? Is the gap acceptable? What is happening from grade level to grade level? If your school has taken the staff survey: Do staff report different perceptions than the students of the same indicator? Are there discrepancies? Are there similarities? Why?

You might also compare your survey results to your Mission Statement or core beliefs. Does your school profess the centrality of community? How does that compare with what your students say about Belonging? Does your Mission Statement espouse the importance of actively engaging students in the learning process? If so, is this reflected in the tables having to do with Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, and Spirit of Adventure? Do your school’s core beliefs highlight the value of teaching students to be productive citizens? Do your results for Confidence to Take Action bear out this emphasis?

## Conclusion

The process described above is critical to improving students’ aspirations. In our opinion, there is only one thing worse than doing nothing about improving the 8 Conditions that affect students’ success in school: Asking students their opinion about those 8 Conditions and then doing nothing. You can make a difference for your students when you take the time to listen, take what you have heard seriously, and take on the challenge of improving the teaching and learning environment for you and your students.